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EVANGELISTIC PREACHING

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ISSUED BY
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Evangelistic Preaching

Define it simply as preaching whose immediate purpose is to bring men to accept Jesus Christ. An evangelistic sermon is one in which the preacher sets out to win an immediate decision. It is not the only kind of preaching and no church could live on it alone. Sermons for training, for Christian teaching are quite as necessary. But no church could live on that kind alone, either, though some of them are trying to do it.

1. The very first requisite of evangelistic preaching is to realize the absolute necessity for it. If a man, down in his heart, doubts the necessity for men's accepting Christ, then he will preach flabby evangel-

istic sermons, and they are worse than none at all. One reason why evangelistic preaching is so hard for some of us is that we have lost our rock-ribbed convictions that underlie it—convictions of sin and ruin, salvation by faith in Christ, the possibility of immediate acceptance, and all that.

2. The next requisite is an assurance of the efficacy of evangelistic preaching. We go at our "gospel" sermons with a tired air, as of men who know it ought to be attempted but who do not expect anything to come of it. Some of us are pretty clear that we can't do it. There are enough prominent men who have spoken slightingly of the general method of the direct appeal for decision, to encourage us in our wonder whether after all the day is not past for it. In addition to that, it is hard for some of us, very hard. We admire at least some of the men who preach evangelistic sermons, but ours always seems to fall flat. Now, we are lost if we stop there. Odds are immense that the trouble lies in our effort to copy or follow someone else. We have not yet found the way we are meant to do it. We shall never find the way until we are sure, dead sure, that there is a way for us which will be effective, which will bring men face to face with the decision. Some of us are constantly trying to find that way, the way that belongs to us. Most of our attempts seem to go awry, but after awhile we come to our own.

3. The evangelistic sermon is the most costly sermon we can preach. It takes more preparation and demands more life-blood than any other. Much of our evangelistic preaching is hopelessly cheap. We have put it off to the evening service, for which there are good reasons in general, and we have put off preparation for it until the last minute, for which there is no good reason. On Sunday noon I asked a brother what he would preach about in the evening. "Oh, I hardly know yet; I am just going to give a little evangelistic talk," was the careless reply. Then God help the congregation! A sermon that is thought of by most of us after Sunday noon is apt to be unthought of by our hearers before Monday noon. Yes, I know about Spurgeon, but we are not Spurgeon. Evangelistic sermons demand great themes, greatly dealt with, widely illustrated, carefully wrought out—costly sermons they must be. Better give a little

talk on the doctrine of election or the incarnation, without preparation, than try to preach an evangelistic sermon easily. This is no commonplace—the matter of bringing a man to accept Jesus Christ. It is not so habitual with us who preach that we can venture to handle it carelessly.

4. Evangelistic preaching is capable of greater variety than any other sort of preaching. It is all working toward one result, to be sure, but there are many roads that lead to Rome. The claim of Christ on a man is so wide, so imperious, that it can be asserted in an immense variety of ways. Recently I talked with the greatest specialist on nervous disorders in our country, and found him waiting to hear from a letter which he had written to a dipsomaniac who had come to him for help. He said he had presented in the long letter every plea he could think of from the certain ruin of health to the equally certain ruin of his immortal soul. If he could find the chord in the man's soul which would respond, he could hope to save him. That was part of his greatness. He had no cut-and-dried way of dealing with each case. There was only one thing he wanted to accomplish, but he

would come at it by any path. If we make evangelistic preaching a serious business, we can do it so that neither we nor our people will be wearied by iteration. In a ministers' meeting once a man said: "There are only about twenty great evangelistic texts in the Bible." Even a common preacher could find a thousand, and the man who habituates himself to see the appeal of Christ in texts will find ten times that many. The great thing is that the preacher shall have in mind constantly the thing he is after —a decision for Christ. Then let him come to that goal from any angle.

5. The best preparation for evangelistic preaching is some definite work for the winning of men to Christ. If the pulpit is the only place where a man pleads for Christ, then the appeal loses its eagerness. Its vitality is gone. No man can know how his fellowmen are thinking or feeling unless he comes into personal contact with them. It would surprise some of us to see how easily unbelieving hearers dismiss our arguments or our appeals. We are leaving out of them some essential item. We have not noticed the omission. We will not find it until we come near enough to men for

them to answer back. Then we will see what the argument needs to become unanswerable. It is doubtful if a pastor ever preached a resultful evangelistic sermon without having some actual unbeliever in mind, that kept him true to experience and life. When we go after straw men and knock down straw objections, we get straw for our results. We have to know individual lives before we can talk to men in the mass. We may not know one man actually present, but we know men, not in theory but by actual contact with them.

6. Evangelistic preaching needs more following up than any other sort. The man who sits quiet under the appeal from the pulpit may be the man who will yield when the appeal becomes personal. The direct appeal at the close of the sermon, which shuts every man up to the decision, wisely, manfully, honestly made is a method to be learned. The hollowness of many of our appeals at such times kills them at once. They are unprepared, we have trusted to the inspiration of the moment, and we are flat on our backs when we ought to be at our very best. Nine out of ten of us fall down in the last five minutes of the sermon. The

after meeting, wisely arranged, wisely conducted, is part of the complete sermon. It is not always wise to hold it at all. It needs to vary widely in its manner. It ought to bring the truth directly to those who attend. In the sermon, the preacher says, "They." In the after meeting he says, "You." There, also, he can have testimonies from others which make the truth more real. The personal visitation in the home becomes a necessity. If we have not and will not make time for it, then we are foredoomed to lose the best chance we have.

7. The evangelistic note can be put into all of our preaching. An eminently successful pastor has told me that for six months at a time, in a period of special interest in his church, he sounded the note of immediate decision at every service, morning, evening and mid-week. Some of us have found the very best response to appeals for Christ at our morning service. There are present the undecided sons of godly parents, the men and women who know their duty, but do not do it, and have almost forgotten that they need to say yes to Christ. There are also the great company of believing, praying people, whose

presence gives power to the appeal. The very unexpectedness of it gives power. It presents a phase of the Gospel which our trained Christian easily leaves out of account. An evangelistic sermon at such a time, with a wisely planned opportunity for decision, is often the supreme service of the preacher.

8. Let it not be overlooked, what we may take for granted among Christian ministers, that only the Holy Spirit can give any efficacy in an evangelistic sermon, and His power comes through the earnest prayer of the preacher and the people who love men and want them won. We cannot take of the things of Christ and show them unto men, we cannot convict men of sin and righteousness and judgment, we cannot guide men into truth—only He can do that. But He can do that through us, and that is our only hope. He has chosen to do that through us, and that is His hope.